DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 978 PS 027 126

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| AUTHOR | Chu, Judy |
| TITLE | Relational Strengths in Adolescent Boys. |
| PUB DATE | 1998-08-00 |
| NOTE | 5p.; Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Annual Convention (106th, San Francisco, CA, August 14-18, 1998). |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Adolescents; Child Behavior; Child Development; Childhood Needs; Human Relations; Individual Development; Interaction; *Interpersonal Competence; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Males; Sex Differences; *Sex Role; Sex Stereotypes |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Relational Competence; *Relationship Quality |

ABSTRACT

There has been a resurgence of interest in boys' relationships and boys' development which seems to respond, at least in part, to findings about the centrality and protective power of relationships in girls' development. However, few empirical studies have sought to learn from boys about their experiences, and, in particular, the ways in which they engage in, negotiate, and make meaning of their relationships. This presentation outlines preliminary findings from a study which revisited male development from a relational perspective. Based on the premise that all humans, starting at infancy, have a fundamental capacity and desire for interpersonal connection, this study investigated ways in which this capacity and desire evolve and manifest themselves in boys' lives, with a focus on adolescence. Participants in this multi-site study were 67 boys (ages 12-18) attending public and private schools in California and Massachusetts. This study used ethnographic observations and clinical interviews to investigate ways in which boys negotiate their identities, behaviors, and relationships in light of cultural constructions of masculinity. Dyadic, in-depth interviews were also conducted to elicit narratives about ways in which these boys construct their socio-cultural realities and the meanings that these boys ascribe to their own behaviors and relational styles. The central conclusion of the study is that boys possess relational strengths which, although sometimes hidden, can be considered beneficial to their psychological health and development. It is further suggested that researchers and practitioners focus on providing boys with ways to build on the relational strengths that they already have. (EV)

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# Relational Strengths in Adolescent Boys

Judy Chu

Harvard Graduate School of Education
Larsen Hall, 5th Floor
Appian Way, Cambridge, MA 02138
chuju@hugse1.harvard.edu

American Psychological Association
106th Annual Convention

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## Introduction

Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in boys' relationships and boys' development which seems to respond, at least in part, to findings about the centrality (Gilligan, 1977, 1982) and protective power (Rutter & Garmezy, 1983) of relationships in girls' development. However, few empirical studies have sought to learn *from boys* about *their* experiences, and, in particular, the ways in which they engage in, negotiate, and make meaning of their relationships.

This presentation outlines preliminary findings from a study which revisited male development from a relational perspective. Based on the premise that all humans, starting at infancy, have a fundamental capacity and desire for interpersonal connection (Murray & Trevarthan, 1985, 1986), this study investigated ways in which this capacity and desire evolve and manifest in boys' lives, with a focus on adolescence.

## Sample

Participants in this multi-site study were 67 boys (ages 12-18) attending public and private schools in California and Massachusetts. The majority of participants came from middle class families living in suburban communities. Although the participant population was racially and ethnically diverse, the goal of the study (at this point) is to examine themes in boys' narratives that are common across groups.

## Methods of Inquiry

This study used ethnographic observations and clinical interviews to investigate ways in which boys negotiate their identities, behaviors, and relationships in light of cultural constructions of masculinity. A series of ethnographic observations in school settings served to identify dominant and repeated themes in these boys' behaviors and interactions, as well as to establish rapport between the researchers and participants. Dyadic, in-depth interviews were also conducted to elicit narratives about ways in which these boys

construct their socio-cultural realities, and the meanings that these boys ascribe to their own behaviors and relational styles.

For each interview, a voice-centered, relational method of inquiry was employed which began with the interviewer's questions about relationships and social pressures, was largely guided by the participant's train of thought, and depended on the existence of a genuine connection between the interviewer and participant. This method was chosen because it requires that the interviewer make a conscious effort to "move beyond the party line," so to speak, and elicit what a participant *really* thinks and feels, as opposed to what he believes he ought to say.

**Method of Analysis**

Observations and interviews were analyzed using a voice-centered method (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), with a particular focus on ways in which boys successfully navigate their relational worlds. Although the voice-centered method has historically been associated with studies of girls, it is important to emphasize that the goal of this study is not to impose a model of development on boys that is based on girls' experiences. Rather, this study aims to build (as opposed to validate) models of boys' development which resonate with boys' actual experiences, and learn how cultural constructions of gender become manifested in their lives.

**Results and Discussion**

Contrary to popular stereotypes which tend to depict boys as being out of touch both with themselves and with others, a voice-centered analysis of these boys' narratives highlighted relational strengths. I was particularly struck by the boys' sensitivity to interpersonal dynamics and attunement to their own thoughts, feelings, and desires. It was clear that these boys are active, rather than passive, participants in their enculturation towards societal standards. Not only were these boys aware of cultural messages about masculinity, but they

also described ways in which they negotiate their desire to "fit in" (often achieved by conforming to such societal standards and expectations) with their desire to be true to themselves (which enables and is enabled, in part, by genuine relationship).

However, it is important to note that, unlike adolescent girls, these boys tended not to speak directly about these issues. Rather, the centrality of relationships in these boys' lives and the extent to which their relational styles respond to perceived socio-cultural norms were more apparent in their discussions around other topics, such as proving masculinity, protecting vulnerability, and preserving personal integrity. Furthermore, when this relational voice surfaced in these boys' narratives, it tended to be immediately "covered up" again by dismissal and denial, as these boys explained that they have learned from experience to anticipate negative reactions and consequences to revealing themselves in this way.

Nevertheless, I was impressed by these adolescent boys' thoughtfulness and willingness to share themselves honestly and deeply. The central conclusion of this study is that boys possess relational strengths which, although sometimes hidden, can be considered beneficial to their psychological health and development. Rather than considering boys to be victims of their enculturation, it may therefore be more fruitful for researchers and practitioners who seek to support boys to focus on providing them with ways to build on the relational strengths that they already have.